Transitions between events and experiences take place throughout the life course and into late life. But the pathways by which these are said to occur are not always as predictable as was once believed. This chapter focuses on the interrelated questions of transition and time as they affect contemporary ageing. Older people are said to experience a variety of transitions and events that shape late life. Until recently, these frameworks were considered to be organized according to chronological age, and based on fixed stages of development situated across a linear life course. Yet the current models by which we make sense of the life course are shifting. What it means to age has changed in the contemporary context, with scholars and older people alike reconsidering the expectations of ‘growing old’. As a result, social and cultural understandings now tend to view transitions as more fluid and permeable events that unfold across time. Personal, social, and cultural expectations of ageing that appear in personal scripts and public policies alike become increasingly important where the larger questions of planning for ‘ageing societies’ are concerned.

This chapter explores the following: first, it outlines key approaches to transitions that shape expectations of ageing. This includes the tendency to focus on particular types of transitions, anticipated or fixed patterns configured in linear models of time, and an approximate timing of events that are considered to anchor the life course. Second, the chapter discusses contemporary challenges to fixed forms that were brought about by variations in experience, and the impact these have had on what we know or assume about ageing and late life. The chapter concludes with directions for rethinking personal and socio-cultural constructs of ageing and ‘what it means to grow old’ in a contemporary context. It outlines how reconsidered notions of time and transition can allow better understanding of the disjuncture that can exist between standard life course models and the subjective experiences of older people. We begin in section one with an overview of the multi-disciplinary perspectives on the study of transition.

Age- and stage-based transitions

Transition is a standard concept used in social sciences and public policy to anchor notions of continuity and change throughout the life course. The foundations date back to van Gennep’s (1960 [1909]) groundbreaking work in anthropology entitled Les Rites de Passage. Arguing that
ritual 'coming of age' events in various cultures could be characterized by a pattern of passage between places and spaces, van Gennep (1960) established the basis for explaining movement between status groups, roles, or structures. However, it was only in the late 1970s and early 1980s that transition became a central social science concept, with the collaborative projects led by Hareven and Adams (1982), and Cohen (1987) considered foundational texts on the subject. Cain (1964) is credited with introducing van Gennep's model into gerontology, with these ideas forming the foundations for studies of age stratification (Riley, Johnson and Foner 1972) and the timing of transitions (Neugarten 1979).

Knowledge from anthropology, sociology and psychology shape understandings of transitions and late life. In these fields, transition is used to explain participation in social structures, culture, and ritual (van Gennep 1960, Hertz 1960 [1907]), family and relationship roles (Kahn and Antonucci 1980), and processes of coping or adaptation (see Grenier 2012 for a review). In gerontology, notions of meaning, process, and culture were borrowed from anthropology (van Gennep 1960, Hertz 1960, Turner 1969), with influences from sociology taking the form of either socialization into normative stages such as adulthood (Irwin 1995), or conflict perspectives that drew attention to power relations and structured disadvantage (Townsend 1981, Phillipson 1982). Influenced by dominant perspectives of the time, the result was an understanding of transition firmly rooted in the movement across age- and stage-based roles; a consolidation of transition types, such as retirement or widowhood; and a general acceptance that transitions were organized according to fixed points, deviation from which was problematic.

Ideas borrowed from psychology reinforced the view of transitions as successful progression through relatively age-based stages of growth and maturation. Psychology treated transition as a personal task of maturation (Erikson 1982), adaptation (Baltes 1987), and compensation (Baltes 1997). Continuity and change were depicted as movement across developmental stages, the successful accomplishment of adult developmental tasks, and adjustment across the 'life span'—which is the preferred term in this field (Baltes 1987). Psychological models adhered to 'normal' stages of development, with growth framed as progression through stages such as childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Although most developmental models were considered to end at maturity (around age 40), the life cycle model of Erikson (1982) and the life span perspective of Baltes et al. (1980) extend these tasks into late life. Where Erikson's (1982) eight-stage model spoke of care and wisdom as developmental tasks, the life span perspective focused on adaptation and coping with age-related change (Sugarman 1986, Baltes 1987). Baltes later expanded this work into a model of 'selective optimization with compensation' that explained adjustment in late life as a process of compensating for functional loss (Smith and Baltes 1993, Baltes and Smith 1999).

Ideas of age- and stage-based notions of stability and change became deeply ingrained in gerontological approaches to late life (Cain 1964, Riley, Johnson and Foner 1972, Neugarten 1979, Atchley 1989, Laslett 1989), with age, anticipated patterns or stages, and coping mechanisms providing the boundaries for the life course (Rossi 1980, Cohen 1987, Antonucci, Sherman and Akiyama 1996, Phillipson 2004). Time and timing were crucial elements of this normative model of transition—especially where ideas of individual coping were concerned (Baars 2010). Understandings of transition assumed a linear and progressive storyline where experience was marked by predictable stages and rooted in what Baars (2012) refers to as 'chronometric time’, as determined by calendars and clocks (Bytheway 2009). Timing was also central to transition. According to Neugarten (1979), one moved across age–based stages in a way that was considered ‘on-time’ insofar as it corresponded with standard expectations, or ‘off-time’ if it differed from them. For example, an early retirement at age 50 would be considered ‘off-time’, as would a late retirement at age 75, when compared to the standard of age 65. Although
Neugarten’s work on expectations was embedded in the age- and stage-based models of the time, the notion of timing, combined with the view that events could be experienced differently if expected or unexpected (Neugarten and Hagestad 1976, Neugarten 1979), created space for understanding individual variations in experience. We turn now to the challenges of what is known and assumed about ageing and late life in a contemporary context.

The life course, contemporary challenges, and the cultural turn

Contemporary challenges with regards to transitions and time can be contextualized within shifting approaches to ageing and the life course. The introduction of individual and institutional perspectives on the life course marked an important turning point in the study of late life. On the individual or ‘personological level’ (Dannefer and Settersen 2010), Elder’s work linking developmental theory with history prompted a change from viewing transitions as fixed stages as one ages, to a series of transitions and trajectories that occur across an individual’s life. Scholars outlined how early experiences could affect late life outcomes, and introduced variations between experiences (Elder 1974, Harveen and Adams 1982, Cohen 1987), which altered the broader frameworks for late life. Similarly, ideas such as continuity (Atchley 1989), whereby identity provided the means to achieve stability despite change, created the space for consistency based on an unbroken thread located in an individual’s lifelong identity. Institutional perspectives based on the relationship between institutions, structures and the life course were also developed (see Dannefer and Settersen 2010). In this case, institutions and structures—including policies and practices—were considered to shape ideas about what was appropriate across the life course (see Neugarten 1979, Kohli and Meyer 1986, Settersen and Hagestad 1996, Mayer 2004, Kohli 2007). Transitions were no longer only considered to mark movement between structures and roles, but became viewed as a construct that organized experience, and naturalized expectations, according to rough age- and stage-based models. As a result, the sense of time within which experiences were said to occur was expanded from a segmented period in late life to the entirety of a life course. Transitions thus became contextualized across the whole of the life course; a means to assess or understand experiences and expectations (generally as age- or stage-based frames or structures); and a marker of the moments where continuity/change, negotiation of experience, and adaptation or rupture could occur.

Challenges from diverse social locations, and the cultural turn in gerontology, also affected what was known about transitions and late life. Gerontology began to take note of differences in experience (Blakemore and Boneham 1994, Calasanti 1996, McMullin 2004) and the importance of subjective interpretation (see Ray 2000). A greater consideration of how culture could shape ageing also brought an awareness of cultural constructs; standard and alternative scripts and pathways for growing old; and the interpretations of the forms, timing, and meanings of change (Cole 1992, Featherstone and Wernick 1995, Gillear and Higgs 2000, Andersson 2002). Questions focused on what ‘meant to grow old’ (Cole and Gadow 1986), and older people’s experience came to be understood as shaped—or ‘aged’—by culture (Gullette 2004). New images of ageing and lifestyles began to appear, increasingly defined by ‘success’ and leisure (Katz 2005). The emerging visions of ageing thus began to include a noticeable acceptance of variation in experience and blurred life-stages. What was known about the transitions that were said to occur was increasingly called into question. For example, entry and exit into and from the labour force were unclear, family roles previously considered typical could no longer be standardized across situations, and ageing itself differed depending on social location. It was no longer possible to suggest static models of transition or assume that age- and stage-based models could universally explain late life (Blaikie 1999, Featherstone and Wernick 1995). As such,
increased recognition of diversity and cultural interpretations of ageing came to alter expected transition types, expanding these beyond ‘typical’ forms. Transitions come to be viewed as fluid locations of experience that were increasingly focused on subjective interpretation and negotiated meaning (Hockey and James 2003). For example, identity claims and locations other than age (e.g., migration or social locations) began to appear as prominent pathways in older people’s conceptualizations of transition (Grenier 2012). The idea that the life course had the potential to be shaped by social and cultural forces, as well as by older people themselves, came to impact understandings of transitions and late life.

A link—or lack thereof, in some cases—between suggested models and lived experience became important from the personal to social planning levels, with ageing and transitions redefined by older people and policies alike. On the personal level, older people’s accounts challenged standard age- and stage-based models of transition that were rooted in linear and chronometric time. Their emphasis on statements such as ‘I am not old’ revealed the contradictions between expected age-based transitions, for example, and their lived realities. It also questioned the assumption that their life experience would unfold as a linear and progressive narrative. In society, the collapse of previous frameworks is visible through the appeal of ageless lifestyles of leisure in retirement (see Featherstone and Wernick 1995, Gilleard and Higgs 2000), and in political projects through the reframing of concepts such as dependency (see Biggs et al. 2006). Together, these examples demonstrate the redefinition of ageing, whereby identity, lifestyle and experience are used to negotiate ‘what it means to be old’ and confront standard models of transition, time, and the life course (see Kaufman 1986, Biggs 1999). These subjective claims bear witness to a shift in emphasis from fixed forms of transitions to a more contested terrain. It is against this backdrop that questions of the socio-cultural context and constructs within and against which transitions are shaped, lived and negotiated are key.

However, despite an awareness of the fluidity of experience within contemporary context, approaches to ageing and late life continue to reproduce age- and stage-based boundaries that are rooted in linear notions of time, and overlook the social norms and cultural values that accompany late life transitions. A good example of how age- and stage-based notions continue to underpin the expectations for late life can be found in how Laslett’s (1989) original distinction between the ‘third age’ as a time of opportunity and the ‘fourth age’ as a period of decline have become solidified as important socio-cultural thresholds (see Baltes and Smith 1999, 2002, Gilleard and Higgs 2011). Although intended to challenge the naturalization of age as chronology in the contemporary context, the use of the ‘third age’ as a socio-cultural construct has resulted in the reinforcement of a stage-based rift that is rooted in the distinction between health and decline in late life, and the idea of progressive decline across a linear backdrop. The third age has been aligned with a desirable and consumable lifestyle, and the fourth age as a period of decrepitude and decline (Gilleard and Higgs 2011, Turner 1989, Grenier 2012). Yet examples such as illness or impairment, which may be more cyclical or temporary in nature, challenge fixed transitions that are understood along linear models of time. Likewise, contemporary conditions such as migration extend the idea of transition across various places and spaces. However, the lingering fixed expectations of transitions continue to embed understandings within age, stage and linear time; fail to account for new contemporary types of transitions; and sustain a socio-cultural divide between experiences of health and decline in late life (Grenier 2012). Transitions that are more closely aligned to experiences from diverse social locations such as gender, ‘race’, disability and sexual orientation are often overlooked, as are the implications of a-typical timing (Calasanti 1996, McMullin 2004). As such, one could argue that the standard age- and stage-based norms that form the foundations of much of social gerontology fail to account for
the conditions and variations of contemporary culture. A remaining problem however, is how to understand current and emerging forms of transitions and time.

Reconsidering time and transition

Contemporary challenges call for alternate approaches to the study of transitions and time in late life. The cultural turn in gerontology has helped to take account of the varying meanings that constructs can hold on social, cultural and personal levels. Lessons learned suggest that a reconsideration of the differences and fluidity that can exist within and between accounts is central to developing models that are more in line with older people’s experiences. Introducing the issues of variation where paths and opportunities are concerned seems to hold enormous potential, with understandings of how stories are situated in time a central component of the analysis (Grenier 2012). Contemporary readings suggest that transitions may be organized along completely different lines of experience than age or stage. Migration and chronic illness, for example, are good examples of transitions that destabilize age- and stage-based notions at the foundations of social gerontology. In the case of migration, linear trajectories based on chronological age may be disrupted by patterns of movement, experiences of disadvantage in the new host country, as well as subjective variations in notions such as ‘home’. In the case of chronic illness, it is the uncertainty, timing and severity of illness that challenges fixed notions of age and chronometric time—especially when such illness may occur earlier than expected, involve moments of recovery and re-occurrence, and create disjunctures between older people’s experiences and cultural constructs of health and illness in late life. As the life course is increasingly viewed in socio-cultural terms, thinking along these lines can help us better understand the socio-cultural constructs of age; relationships with institutional structures, policies and practices; and negotiated experiences across time and in relation us existing models (also see Gubrium and Holstein 2003, Hockey and James 2003, Bytheway 2009).

It is possible that time, rather than age, may represent an organizing feature of older people’s lives. Considering how lives are experienced in time, for example, may reposition ageing as a part of life rather than a separate period, with ‘being’ or ‘living in time’ a more appropriate frame (Baars 2012). Transitions, for example, may be comprised of flexible or relational aspects that include a liminal process of being and/or feeling in-between standard or expected models (Hockey and James 2003). Introducing an analysis of time—and in particular non-linear and non-chronometric models of time—into our understandings of older people’s accounts may create greater space to recognize new forms of transitions. That is, a variable analysis of time may create the space to understand when these transitions occur, how they unfold, and what they mean to older people. Yet, while such an analysis appears descriptive, this analysis of time must also occur in relation to the social and cultural constructs said to shape older people’s lives, and against a general backdrop of institutional and structural features. It is here that something along the lines of the distinction between age-differentiated thinking, whereby structured experiences are organized by age-based stages, and an age-integrated model, whereby these features interact over the entirety of the life course, may have relevance (Riley, Kahn and Foner 1994). For example, researchers could explore the impacts of diverse social and structured locations over the life course, especially in terms of age relations and cumulative disadvantage; alternate trajectories and pathways of transitions that differ from fixed models; and a more detailed understanding of the socio-cultural context that can shape and influence interpretations of ageing and late life. Such an approach, however, rests on the need to connect the storied accounts of older people with the larger macro-level contexts that form the backdrop for experience.
Understanding the relationship between suggested and experienced models of transitions and time becomes increasingly important in a context where ageing and late life are rapidly transforming, and where governments are progressively more invested in reshaping expectations and approaches to ageing. A combined focus on the macro-level discourses and micro-level narratives can help to explore how transitions experienced by older people may or may not correspond with the emerging policy picture. The intersections between policy, institutional practices and lived experiences are thus central to understanding transitions and the life course. Adopting a flexible interdisciplinary approach to the study of transition allows for a careful consideration of how older people may exist between ages and stages, cultural constructs, and structured experiences that influence what is known, expected or experienced in late life. Concepts such as fluidity, difference and time provide new paths to consider multiple forms of organization and diverse experiences as older people move across the life course. This approach can aid in identifying the differences that may exist between suggested macro-level ‘shapes of ageing’ and the subjective interpretations of older people that may in part be shaped by such models. Considering the experiences as both shaped or defined and experienced by older people will provide fresh insight into expectations and the management of ageing and transitions across time.

Conclusion

Developments in cultural gerontology reveal that the transitions and pathways through the life course are less predictable than once believed. While key approaches in the study of ageing have tended to focus on particular types of transitions, anticipated or fixed patterns, and an approximate timing of events considered to anchor the life course, ideas about transitions have shifted toward more flexible interpretations and events that unfold across time. Contemporary contexts of ageing call for more nuanced understandings of ageing and the life course. Adopting models that consider fluidity, difference and alternate pathways can help us reconsider the notions of time and transitions, and provide insight into the disjunctures that exist between dominant age- and stage-based approaches rooted in linear time, suggested models for ageing and late life, and the subjective experiences of older people.

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